Can't Do More, Can't Be More
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by radio_tsunami

Summary

December 20th, 1959.
Its been four days since the Poets found out about Neil's suicide, and the fallout that ensues

Or:
Knox has no idea what to do cuz Charlie is collapsing and Neil's dead and Charlie seems to be going further off the deep end - and Charlie himself literally can't do anything but continue with self destructive behaviour

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

hi there !!

before reading: please read the tags carefully. I think I've added everything that needs to be added (if theres more, i would be eternally grateful if you lmk!). Theres a lot of rough themes throughout the fic which continue through all chapters, so the tags are essentially warnings.

other than that, I hope you enjoy!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Charlie couldn't remember how many days it had been since Neil died. Or weeks. Or months.

Actually, that was a lie.

Deep down, he knew how long it had been, but right now he couldn't think.

Couldn't string together a coherent thought, couldn't feel, couldn't remember.

He knew that Todd was probably struggling, probably more than struggling. Charlie didn't care, didn't care *to care*. He took a swig from the bottle next to him. Another one, maybe one more, or two – he lost track. Although the alcohol made his brain feel as if it was pressing through his skull, it let him breathe slightly.

He thanked one of those random girls he had picked up to take the poetry meeting for doe-eyeily handing it to him with cost.

A sigh escaped his mouth as he leaned his head against the wall his bed was propped against. Cameron was gone. Charlie had locked him out. He needed silence. *Maybe because if there wasn't complete silence, the noise and booze would make him feel as if he had an aneurysm.*

The sky was grey – that's all it had been since *that morning* when Charlie got the news. Snow was still on the ground, but Todd's tracks from *then* had been covered with a fresh layer. *Removing any trace– any trace that anyone cared any little bit about Neil.*

He took a deep breath. Ran his fingers over the faded scars on the inside of his forearms.

Charlie knew this was wrong. Knew that his friends were also struggling, Meeks and Pitts probably sucking themselves wholly into studying for midterms, Cameron silently sitting alone somewhere and —

Charlie didn't want to imagine how Todd was doing, or what he was doing. *He hoped it wasn't what Charlie himself had resorted to– hoped that Todd wouldn't fall over the deep end like he had.* He dragged his hands down his face, barely feeling his skin being pulled down.

A thought – or someone – came to mind. Someone Charlie had been deliberately trying *not* to think about. Knox was probably out there, crying into Chris' arms, Chris running her fingers through his hair, telling him he would make it through this, that they all would.

Charlie downed the full bottle.

———

Knox was concerned.

Ok, maybe a little more than just concerned, maybe extremely worried was the right way to put it.

All of the poets were hurting after Ne–

Knox was lucky that Meeks and Pitts had each other's backs, so he knew that they would be able to comfort and support each other, easing the burden off of Knox's shoulders, since he seemed to be the only one excluding the two mad-scientist-esque poets who were holding it together.

Well, he couldn't really vouch for Cameron – he hadn't seen him save for a couple of times in the bathrooms in the young hours of the morning. *He was probably spending all of his time dedicating himself to school – to forget everything that had happened even for a few minutes with extensive Latin work.*

That left Todd and Charlie.

He had made it his duty to stay by Todd's side all he could, since the boy was quietly drowning in his grief of the events on December 15th of that year, only a couple of days ago. Most of the time, comforting Todd would not be close to Knox's responsibility (and he said this with all the love he had in his heart for Todd, but there were better equipped personnel), but the standard selection was either de– or was wasting away and ruining themselves.

In an oddly anticlimactic flourish, that brought Knox to Charlie.

Unsurprisingly, with all things that concerned him, Knox didn't know where to start. Honestly, given the course of time that had happened that winter, he knew that his feelings towards Charlie were more than he allowed himself to feel, that they were deeper rooted in his veins and sprawled across his whole mind and heart until they wrapped and consumed and devoured whole. It definitely left him uncertain about his relationship status with Chris, unsure how to deal with it given this revelation, but he wasn't worried about how Chris would react (given how he'd seen her look at Ginny that night of the play (he tried not to let his mind stray further into that night)).

As much as Knox was deemed the "lover boy" of the poets, he didn't allow himself to linger further on the train of thought. He had the other aspects of Charlie to deal with.

In simple terms, Charlie had spiraled.

Though he couldn't really tell how far the extent of his collapse went, since Charlie had locked his dorm room door in some makeshift way, and Knox hadn't seen him out of the room at any point since the morning after the play. Well, he knew Charlie had used the bathroom multiple times since the start of his self-isolation, since some of the other boys had seen him while going there themselves in the middle of the night, but he hadn't seen him in class or in the other common areas.

From what Knox heard, Charlie looked destroyed. The others who lived in their small dorm wing had described to him with an intensity of how he resembled a ghost.

All that did was make Knox even more worried.

He had tried countless times to get Charlie to let him in, had tried to get Cameron to let himself and Knox to convince Charlie to let his

roommate get study materials or other unimportant objects solely for the purpose of Knox speaking to him.

Today was no different.

Knox was seated outside of the room, leaning his back on the door. He was playing with a piece of scrap paper from his chemistry book that he had shaped into a mini airplane, folding and unfolding it to distract his hands. There was only silence that greeted him from the other side of the door.

Knox spoke out to the void.

“Hey Charlie.”

Nothing.

However, he had predicted this. Well, not predicted. More like he knew it. Charlie hadn’t responded to any of Knox’s attempts, and today was no different.

“We’re worried about you. Todd misses you.”

Silence.

“I miss you.”

———

He felt like the lousiest piece of shit, in all honesty.

It was dark now, the sky dulling into a deeper shade of blue, the trees a black shadow. *Too similar to that morning.*

Charlie was now nursing a bottle of god-knows-what (as long as it was alcoholic he didn't care), propped up against his bed. A dull ache scaled up his back from the awkward position, painfully keeping his mind aware of his surroundings and circumstances – as much as he tried to forget them.

Knox had left however many hours ago. Charlie couldn't face him, not like this. He felt horrible every time he heard the boy's back slump against the door to sit down, and every time he debated letting him in. But not now. Charlie knew he was a mess, that was a fact he couldn't deny. At least he could say he hadn't really hit rock-bottom yet – that was a couple of bottles away.

His hands ran up his arms. *He didn't want to think what he'd turn to when the alcohol ran out.*

At the moment, his stomach was turning in on itself. Trying to steady himself, he put his hands to the wooden floor, accepting any cold his nerves warned him about.

A gag. *Fuck.*

Charlie had two options: he could vomit in the trashcan by his desk, or he could risk coming across one of his friends leaving his dorm to sprint to the common bathrooms.

Given classes weren't going to have finished for the day for another hour or two despite the lack of light (it was winter after all), Charlie decided to go with the latter.

—

Charlie had just finished puking the alcohol from his system when he heard the door to the dorm bathrooms swing and groan open. He leans his head against the wall of the locked stall he's in, eyes focused on the ceiling, attempting to conceal his ragged breathing. Suddenly he was highly aware of the sweat slicking his back and neck.

Footsteps echo nearer to Charlie's stall.

"Charlie? Is that you?"

Knox's voice is hesitant, and blatantly distressed.

If Charlie answers, Knox will strike up countless questions about what the fuck Charlie was doing– or how he was doing (a conversation he would much rather avoid). Or he'd yell at him for being such a coward. The other possibility would be Knox leaving – that he would've gotten sick of Charlie's *antics* and leave him to deal with his own swamp of catastrophe. A pang tears through his chest at that thought.

If he doesn't answer, well, he's fucked. He had no way of answering without Knox recognizing his voice, and if he says nothing, it could just confirm his suspicions – *and put more distance between them, something Charlie has frustratingly and unintentionally already done.*

So he answers – and tries to mask his severe decline since–

“Yeah.”

Ok, so he failed miserably, but he tried. And obviously it wasn’t indicative of anything, but Charlie has never spoken with so much lack of bravado as “yeah”.

———

It’s safe to say that Knox is stunned when he sees Charlie.

Chapter End Notes

> your honor i promise you theyre normally silly idiots i just projected my angst playlist on them..
>
> anywho, hope you liked it! there's gonna be more to come.. i have a vague idea of a short storyline and ending in my head, its just that i have zero motivation to do it all in one go
>
> feel free to leave any comments, i absolutely love any feedback/ what you thought/a hello/literally anything !! <3
>
> my tumblr: radio_tsunami

Chapter 2: compassion

Chapter Notes

> hey guys!! here's another chap! won't say much up here to let you get to it!!
>
> enjoyyyy

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When drowning, there is a moment in time between losing your last bit of oxygen and losing consciousness. Where you restrain your body's natural instinct to gasp for air while trying to propel yourself back up to the break between sky and sea. Where your chest capsizes and shrivels in with the pressure build up. There's a certain burn to it, the heat and intensity oxymoronic to the cold, asphyxiating water surrounding you.

Knox feels like he's drowning when he looks at Charlie.

He doesn't even look like a remnant of himself a week ago. Sweat creates a layer of shine on his forehead, droplets moving lazily down his neck. If it had been a different situation– a moment after Charlie had finished rowing, dead-exhausted and smirking a little too genuinely – Knox would've cracked a joke, or even a lighthearted complaint about it. But they're not. Charlie is hugging his knees to his chest, sitting on the floor of the bathroom, looking up at Knox with an ocean of indeterminable emotions, and all Knox feels like doing is letting his heart break.

"I knew it was bad, but I didn't realize it'd be Knox's-jaw-on-the-floor bad," Charlie half-jokes weakly.

Knox realizes with a sense of urgency that he's been inexplicably standing at staring at Charlie for God-knows how long. Pulling away from his thoughts, he rushes to his knees in front of the boy, quick to

put his hands on his shoulders. Charlie stares at him, a slight shock breaking through his well-trained mask. He studies his face for the first time since– since that morning.

Working his way down, Knox notes Charlie's furrowed brow, deep inset eyebags that bruise his otherwise beautiful eyes (oh, and how Knox could go on about those), and his chapped lips. There's evident grief in his expression, mixed with some frustration, but there's another flicker in the boy's stare that he can't decipher. He forces himself to look away, something squeezing his sternum.

Another feeling rises – the initial worry dying down to a dull thrumming – and grips Knox's throat.

"Charlie, what's going on with you? I know– I know this is hard for you, especially you, but this isn't the way to deal with it."

Charlie's mask breaks slightly as he turns his head away from Knox. Something contorts his face, and Knox kicks himself internally for not being able to read it.

"I'm fine."

Knox audibly laughs at that, cold and harsh and not like himself at all. He sits down across from Charlie, scanning his pale complexion and dark overcast of his eyes. Although the only thing that the voice in Knox's head has been screaming at him was *"Charlie doesn't look like Charlie"*, he can't help but cycle back to it. This boy in front of him isn't half of the snarky, smirking one he knew before all of this. There's no shred of his once constant grin, no structure to his hair (which he used to meticulously gel and style each day, making the Poets wait before any trip off the grounds), no mischievous glimmer.

But what agonizes Knox the most is the lack of fire. More than any

new differences to Charlie (the smell of smoke and alcohol, mainly), the absence of his cornerstone intensity and heat is the most prominent. And it hurts. It hurts watching him slowly burn out. It hurts knowing that he's submerged in whatever he's doing to deal with Neil's–

He shakes his head, looking away. "It's obvious you're not. Charlie, please, tell me what's going on. I can help– or at least try to help, if you just tell me what's happening. This isn't like you, and I-"

"Stop telling me what to do, *Knox*."

Charlie throws the name like an insult, causing the namesake in question to whip his head back to meet Charlie's glare.

He hates it. Hates the obvious anger and frustration and despair that barely glints behind the other two emotions, hates how everything is directed at *him*. Hates the lack of a nickname, or lilting tone even in the simple imperative, and it hurts.

So Knox does what he can do best, although it would be better in a romantic situation. *His heart stutters at that, a raw pain that wishes that this had been a romantic setting, time, and place, ignoring everything that has happened in the past.*

Confrontation.

"Charlie, this has *got* to stop. You're hurting yourself, obviously, I don't know what you're doing, but obviously it's closing into what you used to be like, and it's not healthy. Do you even know what you're doing to the others? Have you even spoken to Todd? You're here, drinking your sorrows away – and don't tell me its not drinking, because you fucking stink – and expecting that nothing you do is

going to effect the others. And Neil– Neil would've wanted you t-"

"Shut up. Shut up, Knox." The sentence leaves him reeling over his outburst, rerunning his mind over the words that left his mouth. *What you used to be like. Neil would've wanted you to*. God he was an idiot. Only some insensitive asshole would say that, and Knox felt a stab through his sternum again, but he persisted. Charlie was here, Charlie was in front of him, and although the interaction was far from even decent, Knox had to persist while he had the chance.

"But you know that's what he would've wanted!" He wouldn't want you to d-"

Charlie's lip curls back, aggressive and defensive and almost snarling — but it lacks its usual bite.

"You don't get to speak for him, Knox, you don't. He's dead, and clearly we didn't know him well enough because he shot himself, Knox, and I didn't see it coming, and I know that it was bad with Mr Perry, but i didnt realize it was that bad and-"

His grip tightens, forcing Charlie to look up from where he was shaking his head and focusing on the ground while the words spilled out of him like black ink.

"Charlie, it wasn't your fault, but you need to stop what this is. Talk to me, Look, I know you like to put on a strong front, but you don't have to hide what you've been through like–

"Knox I told you to fucking shut up."

Charlie looked angry now, furious even.

The next thing Knox knows is that he's been shoved into the other wall of the stall, surprisingly overpowered by the smaller boy, though his brain then helpfully supplied the fact that Charlie was the school's rowing stroke.

"If I hear one more fucking word out of your mouth, telling me about what I do, your problems with it, when you're too busy most of the time swooning about *Chris*, and now you only step in when Neil is dead, then clearly you need to think fucking twice before lecturing me."

Charlie was shaking. Visibly shaking. His eyes were glassy, though the aggravation that speared through his pupils were clear.

After an agonized inhale, he continued speaking. "I don't need your help, and I never have, despite what you like to tell yourself about what happened those months ago."

The words were more marring than any jab to the nose had been.

Knox opens his mouth to say something in response, but quickly closes it. The boy in front of him only scoffed before shoving Knox back into the wall to give himself moment to stagger up and storm out of the dorm bathrooms, the door furiously swinging open before slowly shutting due to the weird-restrainment things on the hinges Knox vaguely remembers Meeks and Pitts tried to explain to him a couple of months back, allowing the door to close silently.

There's a ringing in his ears that he can't seem to shake for a few minutes, before he takes a shuddering breath,the air burning through his lungs. There's a lump in his throat, heavy and painful. It sounds cliche, the whole situation. Not the cliche that Knox would be familiar with, but a cliche nonetheless. In the privacy of the bathroom, he lets himself curl his long knees up to his chest, wrapping his arms around

his lanky legs, tucking his head into them.

Just for a moment. Just to catch his breath. Just to process the conversation with Charlie, the look in his eyes.

———

Pitts knows there's something wrong the moment Knox sits down at the dining table. Well, more wrong than what had happened already, but that was besides the point. He had been the first to arrive with Steven in tow, Cameron showing up a minute or so after. Then it had been Todd, black leather notebook clutched tightly under his arm, now slightly worse-for-wear as more pages bore the telltale signs of his aggressive soul-scribing.

Knox slumps in the chair in front of him, rattling the plate and cutlery in front of him. He picks up his plate to shove some food onto it, muttering some inaudible words, but Pitts can tell that it was nothing positive.

Steven breaks the silence.

“Knox..?” It’s tentative, probing slightly at the atmosphere around him.

Knox shoots up straight, muscles visibly going rigid as all the shadowed frustration Pitts now realized was on his face melts away.

His face scrunches with something indeterminate, eyes full of sorrow and a slight tinge of something that Pitts can’t quite pick out.

He opens his mouth to say something, holding it open for a second. Closes it. Clearly something was up, and Pitts sees Steven's eyes narrow (barely, unnoticeable to the untrained eye, but he knew the boy), from his peripheral vision to support the thought running through his head.

"I ran into Charlie."

Todd, who had been scribbling furiously in his notebook (and paying no heed to the half-formed conversation), shot his head up so fast Pitts was worried he had whiplash.

"What? Is he ok? Why hasn't he gone out of his dorm for — what, like — a week?" Steven shoots at Knox, frantic and sharp.

Five days, actually. You're two off.

Pitts quickly scraps his inner monologue, empathizing with redheads anxiety around the situation. Although he must be more worried than Pitts thought, give the error. *Steven has rarely ever made a mathematical mistake.*

Under the dining table, his hand reflexively reaches out to the other's, currently bunching his uniform slacks. He wants to be a source of comfort. To be grounding. Yet something in him hesitates, quickly winning the majority, and he pulls his hand away before initiating contact.

A shuddering breath in, almost silent if not for the proximity of the boys at the table, pulls him out of his thoughts. Knox's knuckles are bone white, gripping his fork tightly, his eyes fixated on the plate in front of him. He looks up, and Pitts is sure he's never seen the proclaimed loverboy more uncertain, scared, tired— compassionate..?

“He’s… he’s really struggling, I think. A-and I know that we all are, and I miss Neil so, so, so much, but he was Charlie’s best friend— you know how they were,” He sucks in a jutting breath, seemingly steadying himself before determination sweeps over his features. “I found him in the bathroom, throwing up. He reeked of alcohol— and that’s even by Charlie’s standards.”

An apprehensive silence.

The lack of sound suffocated them for thirty-seven seconds (and yes, Pitts had counted) before Cameron released the chokehold with a groan, throwing his head back behind his chair, his hands covering his eyes. Suddenly he lifted himself out of the chair, grabbing his plate and utensils before quickly grumbling about some homework he had to do.

The silence returned for the rest of lunch.

Chapter End Notes

ok so this was like going absolutely nowhere for a week, but then after spending everyday reading 100k+ of just pure klangst I tried this method i saw (aka fuck it we ball from procrastination of other things..)

but yeah!! I thought it’d be cool to have Pitts in as another perspective.. plus sneaking in Mitts was SO DARN FNSKFJSKDB but uhhh

Oh yeah i wasn’t sure about how to write the mutual pining between my lil babies — i wanted to make it pretty subtle but let me know if its too subtle
my tumblr: radio_tsunami

ANY FEEDBACK IS HAPPILY WELCOMED !! hope you enjoyed <3

Chapter 3: little sharp metal things

Chapter Notes

WOO TWO CHAPTERS IN A WEEK?! i was so excited while thinking about this one i HAD to get it out

also im so sorry for what's to come

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They're sitting in the corner of his dorm by the window, the one that lets in golden rays of summer and fresh breeze, seniors shouting great whoops of excitement at the top of their lungs as they organize themselves for their last soccer match at Welton..Charlie is acutely aware of how close Knox is, their shoulders pressing into each other as harlie leans into the taller boy's side. He shouldn't do this, especially with the door unlocked and the threat of anyone stumbling across them at any second, but he can't bring himself to care.

He's tired. So fucking tired. Tired of the looming doom over his head, the darkness rising from the subconsciousness of his mind to paralyze his body bogging it down into a swamp of indifference splattered with patches of the sharpest agony he's probably felt in his life. Tired of the physical strain. Tired of the yelling and disappointment of his teachers as his grades plummet and– and the consequential punishments from Nolan.

For any other topic, Charlie would joke about how Npolan was completely obsessed with him, but it doesn't seem funny. Not when the repercussions of the so-called "obsession" have led him to more anguish than he's already inflicted on himself.

Yet he's here now. Not in Nolan's office, Not in any teacher's office behind the classroom, not sitting on the floor of the showers with blood running down his forearms and a relief that's dulled by a new wave of cacophonic thoughts.

Charlie snaps back to reality when he feels a slight pressure over his tightly clutched left hand, causing him to stiffen reflexively. He forces himself to inhale. Exhale. Opens his eyes. It's just Knox. It's just Knox putting his hand over yours. It's fine. You're okay. *He looks up to the other boy, their proximity finally registering in his negligent fucking brain. It would've had him stammering, furiously blushing, on his knees, contemplating closing the minute gap between them – if it wasn't* this.

If it wasn't like any of this.

Guess that's another thing Charlie's ruined for himself.

Knox's expression looks weird on him, if Charlie's honest. Out of place. There's a crease between his brows, his lips pressed way too hard into a thin line, eyes flicking over Charlie's face with vigor. Searching. He can't read the taller boy's face. There's some element of concern that he's aware of, but this seems to be one of the rare occasions where Knox isn't *positively spewing emotions and thoughts over anyone who so much turns their head in his direction.*

The grip on his hand becomes firmer – more assured. He finds himself looking at the scene again. Knox's voice cuts through the quiet thrumming throughout the room; it's potent despite the howls and laughs outside.

"Charlie." He doesn't look at him, instead focusing his eyes on their two hands together. Why is Knox willingly holding his hand? Does he know about the small somersaults his heart is performing while his internal dread attempts to catch it and squeeze the life out of it? Not that he feels there's much left, but he knows that what is there is dedicated to the owner of the larger hand over his own. *What could instigate the closeness between them, shoulder to shoulder, sitting next to each other, tipping over the edge of platonic. Charlie's brain freezes at the last thought. Could Knox..? No – he's given up on that spiral path – it always leaves him to the same conclusion, more suffocating and rigid than before. Knox only – could only – ever see him as a friend. Best friends, yes, but nothing more. The only reason he's being this touchy is because he's trying to ground*

Charlie. Because he's dug himself into an ever-expanding hole.

"–ade?" He turns back to face Knox.

"Hm? Sorry Knoxious, I was too engrossed in my thoughts of how amazing I am," Charlie hopes he says it with his usual confidence and smirk, but based on how the other boy's strained expression deepens into a frown, he's not so sure.

"I was wondering if you'd let me take the razor blade that you're currently clutching tightly in your hand. You're gonna cut yourself pretty deep if you haven't already," he mutters it, like the lower volume will make Charlie more willing to hand it over.

It works, disappointingly. Would he have told anyone else to go fuck themselves and start sneering and yelling at the top of his lungs? Yes. Does he actually not mind the tone just because it's Knox? Perhaps. So he unravels his hand slowly, Knox's hand lifting the moment he senses movement, to reveal the small, thin piece of metal. The same piece he's desperately relying on to feel any solace of humanity. *He takes it quickly, lifting himself ever-so-slightly to shove it into the back pocket of his uniform slacks, before taking Charlie's damaged hand into both of his, leaning over to inspect the deep cuts tearing their way into his palm.*

The boy seems so frantic in his investigation of the severity that Charlie's a little worried. Ironic, he knows.

"..Knoxious?" He whips his head up to make eye contact with Charlie so fast that he's surprised he hasn't cracked an upper vertebrae. Concern, worry, something else, friendly *affection – but no pity, to his relief and surprise.*

"Hm? Yeah– yeah I'm here. It's just… fuck, Charlie. I'm gonna need to get

some of my disinfectant spray my mom forced me to pack, thank god, at some point. How does that not hurt?"

"I'm used to it." It comes out more of a whisper than he thought it would, but thinking about the cuts have made him aggressively more aware of the fresh ones from just an hour before. When Knox had accidentally barged into his dorm and saw him. When Knox had crouched down next to him, saying nothing, before helping him bandage and deal with the incisions. When Knox had then sat with him by the window. Promised to help him. Promised to get him past this.

"Do you have more of those blades here somewhere? I was thinking maybe this whole thing might be easier if you didn't have to think about the fact they're here"

"Uh- yeah, uhm, there's some more in the blue box under my bed, some in uh- my desk drawers and… there's probably some under the sinks of the bathroom. In a little bag, with some gauze and band-aids."

Knox starts to stand, groaning slightly from sitting for so long. He doesn't let his eyes leave Charlie's.

"Okay, cool, cool. I'll– I'll be right back, okay? I'm gonna go search for the ones in the bathroom first and grab that disinfectant. Just stay there. Alright?" His expression softens more, a slight smile overcoming his features when he stands to his full height.

Charlie can't help but grin back.

"Yeah. Okay. I'll see you then."

--

He’s staring at the little envelope in front of him. Crouching by his bed, leaning on the balls of his feet. Hands shaking. Of course, Charlie hasn’t done anything in six months. Over half a year. Really, truly, believed he was going to get better, move past all of this, grow into his own, happy, person. Had promised himself he would. Bet he knew deep down that he wasn’t capable of change. He would always be the same. Act the same. Disappoint and fall down the same.Some part of him knew that, that day with Knox, and hadn't told him *every* single location he had his *tools* .

Although the booze hadn’t run out, Charlie had gotten tired. Really fucking tired, and it wasn’t enough. Didn’t numb, sway and romanticize the world as it did before. In all honesty, he was the only one to blame, given that he had built his tolerance over the years. *This* was the tipping point. *Though it had been for other things, as well.*

So now he was staring at the coarse yellow shipping envelope, the contents meticulously packed with everything he could’ve needed. Internally Charlie thanks his past self. There’s a slight thump from his bed when it collides with the wall as he’s propping himself up against it. Envelope in hand. One leg out in front of him, the other bent at the knee. *He’s really going back to his* habits *isn’t he.*

So much for “improvement”, but Charlie was never good at it anyway.

The door barges open as he starts tearing the flap of the package; it causes Charlie to almost fly out of his own body and jump out the window, then freeze. The intruder, revealing themselves to be a boy around his own age – red hair sticking upwards oddly, looking frantically searching the room while his chest heaves – finds his eyes on Charlie.

There's a flash of worry when he turns to face him – but it's quickly drowned out by the blank expression tinged with anger.

"Cameron," Charlie greets, whispering and straining.

"Dalton."

Charlie plasters on a coy smirk, placing the envelope behind him on his mattress. The other boy only releases his hand from the door to close it in reaction. Turns back to Charlie.

"What can I do for you, slick?" Cameron's nose crinkles slightly, narrowing his eyes. There's a guarded wall that Charlie can tell he's put up, given how he's crossed his arms. Opens his mouth to speak, only to shut it, furrow his brows, and turn away.

"–with you." His voice is quiet, a loud cry from the brash yelling of his normal demeanor.

"Huh? Sorry, didn't catch that."

"I said: What's going on with you?" Cameron's sneer is audible now, though Charlie can't tell if it's because one of the Poet's sent him here against his will, or his annoyance of having to repeat the question. Either way, Charlie can feel his carefully crafted smile drop. He hopes that it wasn't noticeable under Cameron's penetrating gaze before he gathered himself.

A scoff. "What the– Cameron, I swear if this is another one of your

conspiracy theories like how the grounds used to be a viking settlement then I'm no-"

"You know exactly what I mean. I know you're not stupid, as much as you act like you are. You kicked me out! Of my own room! You haven't spoken to anyone – or, or seen anyone for that matter – since Neil *died* ! Well, except Knox, but that doesn't really count 'cause of how goddamn *wrecked* he was afterward!"

"I-" Died. Neil died. He's known. He knew. Hearing it aloud doesn't make it hurt less. Make the ever-expanding, ever-consuming black hole in his heart smaller. *And Knox– he doesn't know where to start on that front.*

"No, don't plead your case, Dalton. You've fucked up. Majorly. But we both know that you would never in your right mind do whatever you did to Knox, so clearly you must not be in your right fucking mind." He sucks in a sharp breath. "The others are worried. We're all worried. Charlie, you know you can't talk to us. May– maybe not me, I know you probably wouldn't like that," he chuckles, void of any humor, "but you shouldn't do this on your own. *We* shouldn't do this without you."

The room is spinning. He can't see straight. Suddenly the air's water, and he can't breathe. *He can't fucking breathe. It's filling his lungs, back of his throat, heavy and stifling and* painful. He should say something. He should do something. *It burns.*

"..Charlie, you good?"

"No, yeah I– yeah I am. Nothing's– nothing's wrong with me, Cameron, I don't know what you're talking about. I'm fine. You can go back to your glum little study corner."

At that, Cameron's face falls visibly, only for half a second, but he sees it. There's a mix of betrayal, still that *worrying* that Charlie hates, other emotions he can't decrypt, before it latches onto irritation. Charlie can't bring himself to feel bad.

Cameron quickly mutters a "why do I even bother" before he's storming out and swinging the door open and shut with a loud slam.

He screws his eyes shut. Leans his head against the mattress. *It burns. It hurts. It hurts to* breathe.

He can feel the envelope staring at him.

Waiting.

Chapter End Notes

sooooo
uh I don't really have anything to say about this chapter, except for a lil detail i put that im so proud of (Cameron's the first one in this fic to actually SAY smth about December 15th..)

anywho! thank you for all the hits, kudos, comments and bookmarks! i LOVE reading comments and what you guys have to say, so FEEL MORE THAN FREE TO WRITE SOME !!

as always, all feedback is welcome and i hope you enjoyed!

my tumblr: radio_tsunami

Chapter 4: reminiscent pain

Chapter Summary

Knox talks two Todd
and attempts to talk to Charlie

Chapter Notes

brain hruts

enjoy

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Knox found that the word “love” was a little threadbare, in all honesty. It came with a connotation of domestic happiness, light touches, smiles – anything, really that was an all too bright and colorful fairytale. What the princess says to the knight who saves her. Yes, maybe he was known in the group as the one who would chase said fairytale, but deep down he knew he wanted something more. Always did.

Always knew that “love” wasn’t shimmering rays or flower fields – it was painful. It stabbed and slashed and destroyed, burnt down meticulously grown forests, tore apart any walls and shattered windows and slammed doors and– it left you chasing more. More until two stars collided, gravitational forces pulling and pushing aggressively until the burning masses came together and bursted into an array of colors. Or collapsed into themselves and create a void.

Or one star diminishes before the collision can take place.

He finds Todd at the lake docks. He’s sitting just at the edge, facing the water, curled up with his knees to his chest. From afar, he looks like a tiny speck of dark green against the iced overlake, surrounded by bleak, empty trees and grass blanketed in snow. The grounds are quiet, save for the distant chatter of the dorms from where other students are packing for the winter holidays. Todd doesn’t hear him

approach until he's a couple of feet away, his steps previously muffled by the snow creaking on the wood of the dock. He can make out his details more clearly now, noting the woollen sweater on his frame.

Swinging his long legs over the dock's edge to dangle them proves to be harder than it looks. He barely manages to catch himself falling backwards with his hands, wincing when he can feel splinters embedding themselves into his skin. Todd continues staring out the woods past the lake, Knox now noticing his beaten-down journal pinned close to his chest by his knees. He turns to look where Todd is staring, trying to find the point of interest.

They sit in silence for what feels to be a few minutes.

"Have you finished packing?" Knox is startled to hear Todd speak first, whipping his head to be greeted by Todd's inquisitive gaze. His face is otherwise neutral, something surprising Knox from his usual nervous expression. There's deep bags under his red-rimmed eyes, making them seemingly brighter – and more haunting.

"Have you been sleeping?" Todd winces almost impercetively before turning back to the water.

"No."

Knox hums in response, focusing his stare on his hands. They're dry and cracked from the cold, nails jagged and stumped from biting, and his fingers decorated with an assortment of hangnails. He fiddles with his trousers.

"I don't want to be separated from you guys. Three weeks is a while. And– and given everything that's… that's happened… I'm a little scared. And worried."

Todd just nods, a couple of beats before he responds.

“I really miss him. I–” he cuts himself off, burying his head in his hands. Takes a shuddering breath.

The quiet is harrowing, but not uncomfortable.

Knox thinks he should make a move to give some sort of support to Todd. A hand on his back, his shoulder, anything to give some sort of solace to the boy. He doesn’t. He lets him mind wander to the morning after. Charlie had been outside of Todd’s room for a couple of minutes, arms crossed over his fuzzy blue robe, eyes glassy and unseeing as he swivled back and forth. Meeks and Pitts had decided to stand out of the way of Charlie’s hysteric antics, huddled in the corner next to Todd’s door. That used to be Neil’s as well. They had been the ones to hear the news first, Mr. Perry having called the school to “let Neil’s ‘good’ friends know”. Cameron was leaning against the frame to his and Charlie’s own dorm, unfocused and occasionally blinking furiously.

He had been the nearest to Charlie, standing with his arms to the side, gripping onto his pyjamas. *“I can’t do this.”*

“You should talk to him.” Knox’s spiral of thoughts is cut through by Todd’s abrupt words. He has his head up again, a few tear streaks staining his cheeks. His expression is serious, brows lowered and crease, with a slight frown on his face.

“I– what? Huh? Who, Charlie?” At that, Todd stare turns into *knowing*, now with a ghost of a smile on his lips.

“Yeah. Even with what happened last time.” Knox is – for a lack of better words – really, really, fucking confused. Charlie clearly didn’t

want to talk to him. He had, literally, pushed him away. Knox was sure that he was the last person Charlie wanted to talk to about his struggles. Though he would be lying if he said that he wasn't extremely concerned about what the other boy was doing – and how far it would go.

"But– I mean, you guys are the ones who were the closest to– well, all I'm saying is: wouldn't it be better for you to speak to him? He clearly doesn't want to see me."

Todd snorts at that. Barely, but there's some semblance of humor as he does it. He shakes his head.

"Trust me, Knox. There isn't anyone else Charlie would want to speak to. Despite how he can be. And plus, I'm not great with words. Not like–" His small smile has been wiped off of his face, replaced by a blank look – though Knox can recognize the pained expression in his eyes. Turns back to the water. He visibly softens as he runs through his thought process. "He'll listen, if you push. One day, he will. It'll take a while, but he will." Knox can see he's somewhere else, replaying a memory.

"I really, really, want to believe you, but if it doesn't work, then it could be worse."

"Trust me, I've been Charlie before. When it's the right person, it'll work. Just give him time."

—

He's just finished zipping up his suitcases when he goes to see Charlie. He hesitates for a few seconds, closed fist hovering over the wood of the door, before he eventually knocks.

A sigh, along with footsteps becoming louder quickly follow. “Cameron I swear if you’ve forgotten something again or you’re here to lecture me *again* about not pulling crazy shit these ho–” The door swings open, revealing a dumbstruck Charlie Dalton wearing a red Welton hoodie and sweats. “Knox.” he greets.

Knox manages to hide the internal wince he reacts with to the name. “Charlie.”

The boy in question turns back to walk into his room, leaving the door splayed open in invitation. One side of the room has been stripped of its sheets, desk clean and wiped down. Knox would’ve thought that it had been completely cleared out of any inhabitant if there weren’t a few posters on the wall and if he didn’t know Richard Cameron. The other side is messy – papers sprawled on the desk, textbooks stacked high alongside them, books sparsely littering the floor, frumpled bedsheets, posters overlapping each other and leaving no room for plain wall – and undoubtably screaming the owner’s name.

Knox lets himself in, cautiously staying towards Cameron’s side while Charlie flops onto his bed. He pulls himself upright before running a hand through is messy, golden-brown hair. A sharp inhale cuts through the heavy tension, causing Knox to blink himself back to reality, only now aware of the fabric clenched in his hands from his own sweater.

“You’re leaving now?”

“Yeah, later today. Maybe in like an hour.”

“Ok.”

They fall into an uncomfortable stillness, alien to their usual banter and shouting. Knox looks up from where he had been looking down at

his shoes to face Charlie. The boy crosses his arms over his chest, stiffening slightly as he holds his forearms with his hands.

“You sure you’ll be ok on your own here? For three weeks? You’re– you’re always welcome to stay with us, if you’d like.”

Charlie cracks a smirk at that, though it seems more genuine than a dalton’s-about-to-pull-your-leg smirk would be. His eyes gleam with something Knox can’t decipher.

“Looks like someone’s gonna miss me.”

He freezes. Tries to stop the blush creeping up from under his skin. Fails too. There’s a warmth to his cheeks and ears now, and he tries to look away to hide it. Puts his hand on the back of his neck.

If only Charlie knew. If only he could shout it from the top of his lungs. If only he wasn’t so set on making his parents proud with Chris. If only there was a chance Charlie would remotely like him back, but given the few weeks before the chaos had ensued where Charlie came prancing in the cave with two girls on his arm, Knox found it unlikely.

“Just don’t do anything stupid, ok?”

The other boy's face falls marginally at that, his smile souring into a grimace.

“Yeah, cool. Happy holidays, Knox.” He knows that’s his sign to leave. A pang echos throughout the cavity in his chest, slow and suffocating and muffled at the edges. He finds his legs carrying him to the door,

despite his stuttering heart screaming otherwise. Looking back, Knox sees Charlie frowning at the wall in front of him, a pained crease of his brows as he grips his arms tighter.

“Happy holidays, Charlie.”

He doesn’t look back before he closes the door.

Chapter End Notes

this one was reaaalllyy tricky to get out cuz i was thinking about writing it for five days, thinking i should write it for another two, before i sat myself down and powered through

i wasn’t sure about the dialogue, but i did try to make it as in-character as possible

also DO NOT FEAR ! next chapter will probably take a look at charlie’s time during the holidays or just jump.. ill see what works best

also hmm i wonder what’s happening with charlie
my tumblr: radio_tsunami

HOPE YOU ENJOYED LOVE YOU ALL FOR ALL THE SUPPORT !!

Chapter 5: heartache

Chapter Summary

flashforwards three weeks later to the return from winter break conversations, mostly.

tw: implication of ed / not eating enough

Chapter Notes

hey... its been a while... this chapter was gonna be longer but honestly i just wanted to get this out soo its not edited, i haven't read over it, proceed with caution as always and hope you enjoy

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Welton in January, in one word, is depressing. The early darkness, the cold, the fog, they all add to the oppressing atmosphere that the school already imposed on the students. Knox would say – in other years – that January was worse than December, since there weren't any holidays to hope and look forward to. The festive present openings, the family dinners of laughing and smiling away from the halls of Hellton, the late mornings, were gone in January, only to be replaced by the monotony and conformity of the boarding school. This January, though, was better than December. By far.

Knox had spent his winter break trying to have a normal holiday. Trying not to think of the events of that one night. Trying not to think about a certain boy who, right after said events, had devastatingly shattered Knox's heart with the expression on his face. The look in his eyes. He sucked in a breath. Charlie was still at school. Alone. For the holidays. *Better than he went home, given the state of him and his–*

"Knox, get out of the car and help your father with your bags. You're at the age you need to start acting like a gentleman."

He tries not to flinch at that, only nodding his head before opening the backseat door of the family car. The air bites at his skin as he

straightens up, looking around the small school parking lot. There's a multitude of families around, parents hugging boys and hauling suitcases out of the boots of their cars. The sky is that horrible blue gray again, the sun already having moved out of the horizon but its rays still reflecting through the atmosphere. Knox turns around to the back of the car, his father hunched over his own suitcase before looking up at him. He's aware that he says something along the lines of "help me out here, son", but he's too far in his own mind as he automatically (and awkwardly) bends down to pick up the last of his bags.

Charlie is in the building. He'll be in the same hall as Knox in less than half an hour. Knox might *talk* to him in less than half an hour. There's a tugging at his chest that he recognizes as worry. Charlie is in the building. Has been three weeks. With all the other poets – alive poets – off with their families. *Please don't have done something stupid.*

"--ox. Knox. Your mother and I have a dinner to get to. The Danburrys. You remember them, don't you? I sent you over one time to meet Mr. Danburry this fall. You never told me how that went… anyway– we'll see you for spring break, ok son? Make us proud and don't get into any… things again."

Knox had actually relayed to his father how the meeting with the Danburrys had gone, explaining how he had gotten some advice about law and met a nice girl (omitting the fact that she had a boyfriend, and that boyfriend was Mr. Danburry's son). He had a response of im-busy-right-now-ill-ask-you-later, which he never got back. So he nods, taking one bag in his right hand and the other in his left, smiling at his parents before turning towards the path to the school, passing his bike still chained to the fence alongside the collection of student bikes.

—

When he makes it to his dorm, he's greeted by the familiar window

outlooking the courtyard, he lets the tension building up in his shoulders finally release – he hadn't come across any of the poets in the hallway. His roommate's belongings already cover one side of the room, clothes thrown over the back of his chair, sheets tightly done up on his bed, textbooks already starting their precarious climb upwards, while his is still unsettlingly empty.

Knox sets down his two bags by his desk before turning to the door to close it. There wasn't any point in speaking to anyone – he knew what would happen: awkward looks, hesitance, the holding back of words he'd never know, being treated like he was going to break if there was one wrong look. *They're not wrong, just it's not him who they're right about.* He's shoved out of his head when the door bursts open inches in front of him, almost crashing with the person opening it.

"Geez, Knox, stop daydreaming about the next girl you're going to chase after– tsk, swear that's the only thing you do at this point and I've only been your roommate for a semester– who was it before? I swear I remember who it was…"

He blinks a couple of times before registering the boy in front of him (who turns out to be his roommate). Turning his head away, Knox walks back to his desk, lifting one of his bags onto the chair in front of it to open and start unpacking.

"Nice to see you too, James."

"Oh! Right, it was Dalton, wasn't it? Yikes– y'know, I'm surprised he didn't cave your face like he did with his current roommate… Cameron, right?" Knox winces internally, "Yeah, honestly with your endless amount of gushing about– well, whoever it is – I'd assume you'd be the one who got the fist."

There's a knot building up in his chest. It's tying his veins together, clamping arteries and straining tendons. His ligaments feel like they're going to snap, and if he's honest, he feels like he's going to snap as

well. He knows he can get frustrated about this, knows he would and is and probably will get frustrated, but this feels different. Feels like it's broiling in his lungs and their surfactant.

"He wouldn't do that. He knew–knows that he shouldn't have done that to Cameron, and I don't think he'd do that to me, or anyone else, again. That's why they let him stay. He's not some uncontrollable dog or something."

James just heads to his side of the room, rearranging a few sheets of paper on his desk.

"Alright buddy, didn't have to go ham on me."

—

Knox spots two heads of red hair across the dining hall. Another tall brown one, a shorter blonde one. No in between one. He crosses the room, careful not to spill any of his spaghetti and meatballs on the floor. They always have spaghetti and meatballs on the first night back. Sort of an apology for the hell of the semester to come. There's a buzz in the air, the one you find with the overlapping of excited voices telling stories of their holidays, the presents they received, the family and friends they saw. A buzz of happiness and life and nothing remotely close to the experience the solemn table in the corner of the hall had had the month before.

His tray clanks down on the table loudly, causing Todd to jump slightly in his seat and abruptly cutting through whatever Pitts is saying. Cameron's staring out the window behind Knox, Pitts offering a warm smile, Meeks staring at his plate and twirling his fork. Todd looks slightly better than his hollow-eyed look from three weeks ago, his face regaining some color and a ghost of a smile on his lips.

“Hey guys!” He’s not sure what to say, in reality. There’s so much to say, words and grief and sorrow and regret and– there’s a lot. But they can also try to feel normal. Find a normal, whatever that means. He knows he shouldn’t move on this quickly, but it doesn’t feel like moving on. It’s a last arrow at the dying sun before it disappears forever. Even if the sun had been dead for a month, now.

He just needs things to get better. Hope that they can get better.

Pitts seems the most energetic by far. “Knox! How are you? How were your holidays?”

“They were– okay, I think. As okay as they can be given–” his nervous smile drops. The air tightens, slightly, but noticeably. Pitt’s smile falters, Cameron looks away from the general vicinity, Todd looks down. Meeks is gripping his fork until his knuckles are white.

Silence seems to be creeping up to take the position of “new normal”, at this point.

“Yeah, ours were too. Meeks spent them with me, Cameron’s parents took him to France, and I think– Todd, where’d you say you went again?”

“Boston.”

“Boston. Right. I think it was to see your brother, right?” Todd nods slightly.

“Had a project or something. Couldn’t come ho– back to the house.”

Knox tries to give him what he hopes is a reassuring smile, but given his own state he's pretty sure it's not very believable "Oh– that's cool. How have you guys been?"

Pitts glances at Meeks, who's picking at his seemingly untouched food. His non-dominant arm shifts slightly towards the redhead. The boy in question looks up, startled, but seems to register that the others are looking at him as his eyes look around the table frantically. He gives a tight-lipped smile before turning his attention to Pitts. There's a soundless conversation between the two – one that Knox isn't capable of deciphering (his mind is on someo–something else) — with Pitt's eyes flicking to Meek's plate, then back up to eye contact with a knowing gaze, causing Meeks putting down his fork and becoming suddenly very interested with the tablecloth.

That's when he notices a figure coming closer in his peripheral, a familiar gait and fuzzy colors setting off alarms in his head.

———

He should've never come he should've never headed down what was he thinking this was a huge mistake why are they staring is there something they should be staring at? Do they know? It's fine it's just dinner it's not going to kill you Charlie, geez calm down before they notice something's wrong do they hate him? Oh gosh they must hate him he left them Neil would be so disappointed in him why was he here Knox– Knox why is Knox looking at him like that why won't Meeks look either why won't Cameron at least Todd is but oh gosh he looks so upset is he going to hate him? No Todd already hates him shit shit shi–

"Hey… everyone," is what actually comes out of Charlie Dalton's mouth.

There's noise in his head. Sound reverberating over and over and hitting mental walls until all there is a cacophony of self-doubt. He knows they'll probably yell at him, interrogate him on why, why did he leave them behind when it was the worst time to (he's still living in that time, waking up in the early hours of the day with panting and cold sweat and his lungs feeling as if they were going to burst out of his ribcage), why he came back.

But nothing happens. Just Cameron staring at him, his eyes scrunched in something that Charlie knows isn't scrutiny – that's more with a disappointed grimace – but can't place. Knox has his mouth agape. Something in Charlie hopes he's happy to see him, and even more irrationally hopes that he'll stand and up and–

He knows it won't happen here, definitely, and a sinking weight in his core tells him that he knows he wouldn't do it anywhere else. Not with him. It'll happen to a girl with short blonde hair and a perfect, simple smile and a perfect, simple life that'll be just what Knox wants.

Charlie's not sure how much time has passed when he comes to realize he's been standing there awkwardly for who-knows-how-long and rushes to sit down in the empty seat across from Todd. Next to Knox.

No words are exchanged, the atmosphere continues to rest heavily on their shoulders, and everyone seems to finish dinner faster than they would normally. Charlie notices that Meeks seemingly didn't even start. There's a clatter and shift of chairs moving back as the poets all arise simultaneously, picking up their plates and heading towards the table to the left of the double doors to clear them.

Cameron and Todd are already turning the corner of the hallway outside of the dining hall, muttering, Meeks and Pitts having a heated discussion – the former looking exasperated and the latter's brows knit with concern – when Charlie briskly grabs Knox's wrist.

The other boy turns back to look at him, surprise marking his features.

“Can we talk? Please?”

Chapter End Notes

ok so i definitely got a little tired at the end..? im publishing this at like... late. uhhh so if theres a bunch of repetition of words / ooc content / stuff seems a little rushed sorry about that my dudes

updates should be more consistent in the future as well

hope you enjoyed, leave a comment if you'd like -- always love to hear what you guys think :D
my tumblr: radio_tsunami

Chapter 6: ribbons

Chapter Summary

charlie and knox talk, and charlie goes back to l'ecole

Chapter Notes

hi guys! sorry for the long wait.. this took me a while. wrote the first half pretty quick tho?? am tired now
im gonna start putting TW at the end notes so theres like no spoilers so jsut click for the end notes if you want the TW/CW

im gonna shut up now but just so u know i was listenign to "i love you" by billie eilish for the first part so you might wanna listen while reading??
title is from lacy by olivia rodrigo

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“What is it? Charlie, you know you can tell me if something’s bothering you.”

They’re in the library, of all places. Although situated in a convenient place between the dorms and classrooms, rarely any of the students enter its premises. Most prefer the common room in the housing wing, since there’s much more socializing occurring and no teachers to give out demerits. The bells had just tolled seven, the windows only just beginning to cast out moonlight onto the floorboards. The teachers are gone. Rushing the younger students to their dorms. Retiring for the evening before the start of classes tomorrow.

Bookshelves all the way to the arching ceiling, tables taking up the center strip of the long room – decorated with green banker lamps – in neat rows, tall windows with delicate framing. It’s the picture of higher education, of men in business suits and lawyers and New England wealth, of rules and dazzling records. It’s the picture of something so far from the truth, hiding the crumbling pillars holding the students, the coffin lid of a seventeen year old boy.

Standing in front of each other. Face to face. Too close to pass off as simply friends. Too far to allow it to spread like a wildfire into something more. Charlie has his arms crossed. This time, not seeming intimidating. This time it's his shoulders closer to his ears – making himself smaller. His face is turned away to the vast windows, but Knox's eyes are firmly planted on him.

"Charlie, c'mon. Are you okay? Was winter break fine? Please talk to me. You're worrying me."

Charlie sucks in a breath. Closing his eyes, head dipping slightly while his shoulders rise a little more before falling – simultaneously with his arms, leaving clenched fists at his sides – and staring at Knox. His brows are furrowed again, an expression that's becoming more common with Charlie. It's a far cry from his old smirk pulling at the corners of his mouth when he feigned annoyance, before all this happened. Usually, he would strike a sarcastic quip, feigning annoyance at other's annoyance at him, but now all he does is stay still.

"I'm fine. I– I don't really know why I really wanted to talk. Sorry." He bites the inside of his cheek.

"Charlie, it's fine. This has been tough on you. It's been tough on everyone. You can talk about it. You can talk to me."

"Yeah I know. It's not that– It's not that I don't know it's just that– I don't know. I really don't, Knox. I just want this all to stop. I want to– I don't know. I guess… I guess I just want to stop feeling sorry for myself as well?"

He's looking away again. He's always looking away, and yet Knox still finds himself trying to understand why, his eyes flicking back and forth minutely. He takes a leap. An arm outstretched slightly between

them. Pausing, hesitant, before moving forwards again to lightly hold Charlie's forearm.

Knox doesn't miss the slight narrowing of his eyes while trying to hide a wince. Charlie doesn't move, but the weight of Knox's touch feels incredibly heavy. Stones swaying downwards, pushing their way through the water, down to the bottom of a river. He thinks, really, they've been glimmering geodes thrusted down into the murky depths in this situation. His head lifts immediately, now fully focused on Charlie – who's gaze seems pinned to the floor.

"Oh, Charlie."

It's then that he feels the arm wrenched from his grip, now being held by Charlie's other hand. He's taken a small step back. It feels like he's been burnt. Burnt and scorched and nothing like the asphyxiation of water that hits him like an onslaught most of the time around Charlie. It's the choking of black smoke, spreading through his lungs, pleuritic and acute.

He finds his hands on his shoulders, light and dancing, scared to land and transform into something substantial. They do, a few hesitant seconds later. His hands shift, sliding up from the curve of Charlie's shoulders to the base of his neck, holding it gently. As if any slight movement might shatter the moment. There's a tremor in Charlie's breathing, his eye unfocusing, most likely looking through his peripheral vision. Knox can feel himself searching for something in his face, eyes flickering back and forth.

His hands move again, gliding upwards even further, now one lightly hovering over Charlie's turned cheek, the other at the nape below his ear.

"Charlie, can you look at me, please?"

The boy in question stiffens finely before slackening. Knox feels him lean into his hand, turning towards him, staring at him. There's an extra shine to his eyes, one that Knox – despite the hell they've been dragged through this past month – hasn't seen since December 16th. He's brought back to the moment by a choked sound, one that's followed by heavy gasps and furious blinking.

Knox pulls Charlie into the crook of his neck. It feels like the right thing to do. He knows it's the right thing to do, when he feels the movement of the sobs that wrack Charlie's body as he's curled up into Knox's Welton hoodie. His hand is on the back of his head now, and he brings his nose into the head of hair to his side, holding the other boy as firmly as possible, as close as he can while mitigating the risk of them toppling over.

They stay like that for what feels like hours, the sound of crying echoing through the otherwise still air of the library.

———

The last clash of the belltower goes when Charlie bursts through the door of his history class. He was relatively glad that his first class of the semester was history: most of the poets either didn't take the course or were in a different class, so he didn't need to worry about sudden confrontations or awkwardness about his week-long disappearance the week following Neil's death. Though he puts his emphasis on *most* of the poets.

All heads turn to his rowdy entrance, leaving him under observing eyes while catching his breath. Mr. Miller raised out of his chair slightly, leaning into his hands pressed on the surface of his desk. The air turns awfully still, and he thinks if he takes one reeling step back, he might just sprint back to his dorm.

Realizing the state of his situation, Charlie wishes he had just never showed up for first period. If he hadn't shown up for this, no one would expect him the rest of the day. But he was here, in front of the class. He could feel the watchful eyes on him, calculating – judging. He knew that there were words exchanged about him that he never heard to his face, words that he would never hear. Words of disdain at his "rebellious" behavior and his lack of "drive" and the criticism of his careless attitude. About his best friend. About his reaction to his best friend.

Yet he doesn't move. Which means he's standing like an imbecile in front of a crowd of raised eyebrows and opened mouths. Mr. Miller seems to recover the fastest from the dramatic entrance, speaking a few pauses later.

"Nice of you to join us, Mr. Dalton. Please, sit down. I have a lesson to get through."

He snaps out of his small trance, making his way down to his seat, somewhere in the middle of the room. Most eyes have gone back to staring through the windows at the late rising sun or at their notebooks in front of them. Someone's tapping their pencil on the side of their textbook, and Mr. Miller has turned back towards the blackboard, writing the date in the top lefthand corner.

January 11th, 1960.

It was a new decade – Neil was buried with the five.

"Everyone please turn to page 167 of your books to read from there until page 177… or 178. 178, yes, that's right. We'll be looking at The French Revolution. I want complete silence while reading. Now get on with it."

Most of the boys do get on with the task, some continuing to stare in front of them, but most of the high achievers read on. Charlie a few months ago would've done the same, but now he finds himself scanning the classroom. Observing. He didn't used to be so watchful, but– but due to recent events, he couldn't focus. A multitude of them are wearing their sports kit, Welton hoodies and sweaters dotted around the classroom. It was rare to have a week of sports kit and lenience on the uniform at Welton, but given the events that had passed, the school had decided to "relax the rules."

Charlie finds himself looking at Meeks, around at his 10 o'clock. He was surprised to find him in fact not intently reading his textbook, but instead leaning back in his chair – staring down his hands, which were fiddling absently. Meeks was wearing a slightly too large, grey crewneck sweater. Hair seemingly freshly cut, maybe a few weeks of growth from it, but there were no prominent curls coiling around his head like a crown of auburn leaves. The lines of his neck seemed more noticeable now, and when he brought his hands up behind his head to scratch below his hairline, Charlie could see they were visibly slimmer – the knuckles rounding further out than the rest of his fingers.

He hadn't spoken to the boy, not really, since this all started. He had pushed him out, closed his door in his face. Maybe not as physically as he had done with Cameron, but it was all the same. Charlie knew he didn't deserve that, and a part of him didn't want to know how the whole ordeal had affected him.

Out of the blue, Meeks raises his hand. Mr. Miller looks up from the grading he's doing – probably one of the senior's winter break essays – his brows furrowing in slight startlement when he sees who the raised hand belonged to. Meeks never left during lessons. Nonetheless he gave a nonplussed nod in allowance, with Meeks beginning to get up, his chair screeching on the floor, to head to the bathroom. Charlie noted the way his hands lingered on his desk, the light feather of contact he kept continuously from the door out to the bathroom. *Support, probably. But for what?*

He decided to just focus on the work, waiting for Meeks' eventual return and the continuation of the day to go by a little faster.

Chapter End Notes

TW: mental breakdown?? not sure. implied sh and ed but its blink and you'll miss it.

ok so this chapter gave me a lot of trouble but i really hope you guys enjoyed it!! as always feel free to leave comments i love readign them hehe

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